

Fundamental Physics: Where We Stand Today



ESO image

John Baez
TCU
September 9, 2009

By **fundamental physics**, I mean the search for a small set of laws which *in principle* determine everything we can calculate about the universe. The reductionist dream – not always practical, but very seductive.

Where do we stand in the search for these laws? What do we know, and what are the mysteries?

Why do many physicists feel stuck?

Let us begin with the story around 1983, when the W and Z particles were discovered and the Standard Model and general relativity seemed triumphant, after a century of rapid and revolutionary discoveries.

These theories describe 4 forces:

STANDARD MODEL	GENERAL RELATIVITY
Electromagnetism Weak Force Strong Force	Gravity

The Standard Model describes all the forces *except* gravity using quantum mechanics. General relativity describes gravity, ignoring quantum mechanics.

General relativity is a beautiful work of pure thought. The Standard Model is a baroque mess: we live in an interesting world.

General relativity says that freely falling objects trace out paths in spacetime that are ‘as straight as possible’, but that matter curves spacetime according to **Einstein’s equation**:

Given any small ball of freely falling test particles initially at rest relative to each other, the rate at which its volume starts shrinking is proportional to: the energy density at the center of the ball, plus the sum of the pressures in all three directions.

or more precisely:

$$\left. \frac{\ddot{V}}{V} \right|_{t=0} = -\frac{1}{2}(\rho + P_x + P_y + P_z)$$

in units where $c = 8\pi G = 1$.

From this sentence (and lots of hard work!) one can derive Newton's law of gravity in the limit of slowly moving objects and weak gravitational fields. One also can understand:

- black holes
- gravitational waves
- the Big Bang

To illustrate the simplicity of general relativity, let's *sketch* how the Big Bang works. For more details, type

the meaning of Einstein's equation

into Google!

Assume the universe is homogeneous and isotropic. At any time $t = 0$, pick a small ball of freely falling particles centered at the Earth and initially at rest relative to it. The pressure is the same in all directions, so:

$$\left. \frac{\ddot{V}}{V} \right|_{t=0} = -\frac{1}{2}(\rho + 3P)$$

and $V \propto R^3$, so:

$$\left. \frac{\ddot{V}}{V} \right|_{t=0} = \left. \frac{3\ddot{R}}{R} \right|_{t=0}$$

and thus:

$$\left. \frac{3\ddot{R}}{R} \right|_{t=0} = -\frac{1}{2}(\rho + 3P)$$

This applies at any time. By homogeneity it applies to a ball of any size. So, it describes the expansion or contraction of the universe!

What does

$$\frac{3\ddot{R}}{R} = -\frac{1}{2}(\rho + 3P)$$

imply? Until recently, it seemed that pressure is negligible except in the very early universe, giving:

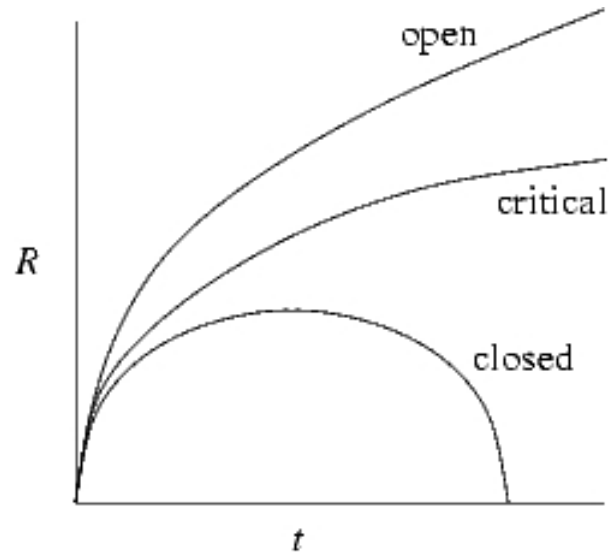
$$\frac{3\ddot{R}}{R} = -\frac{\rho}{2}$$

Conservation of mass says ρR^3 is some constant k , so:

$$3\ddot{R} = -\frac{k}{2R^2}$$

Exactly like the motion of a rock thrown upwards from the Earth in good old Newtonian gravity! *What goes up must come down...* unless it exceeds escape velocity.

So, we get 3 possibilities:



However, astronomers recently discovered that *none of these matches reality*. It seems the universe is expanding faster and faster!

Mystery 1. What is making the expansion of the universe accelerate? Does the vacuum have negative pressure?

Next, the Standard Model. This is a list of *particles* and *interactions*. There are particles that carry forces:

Electromagnetism	γ (photon)
Weak force	W, Z
Strong force	g (gluon)

and particles that constitute ‘matter’:

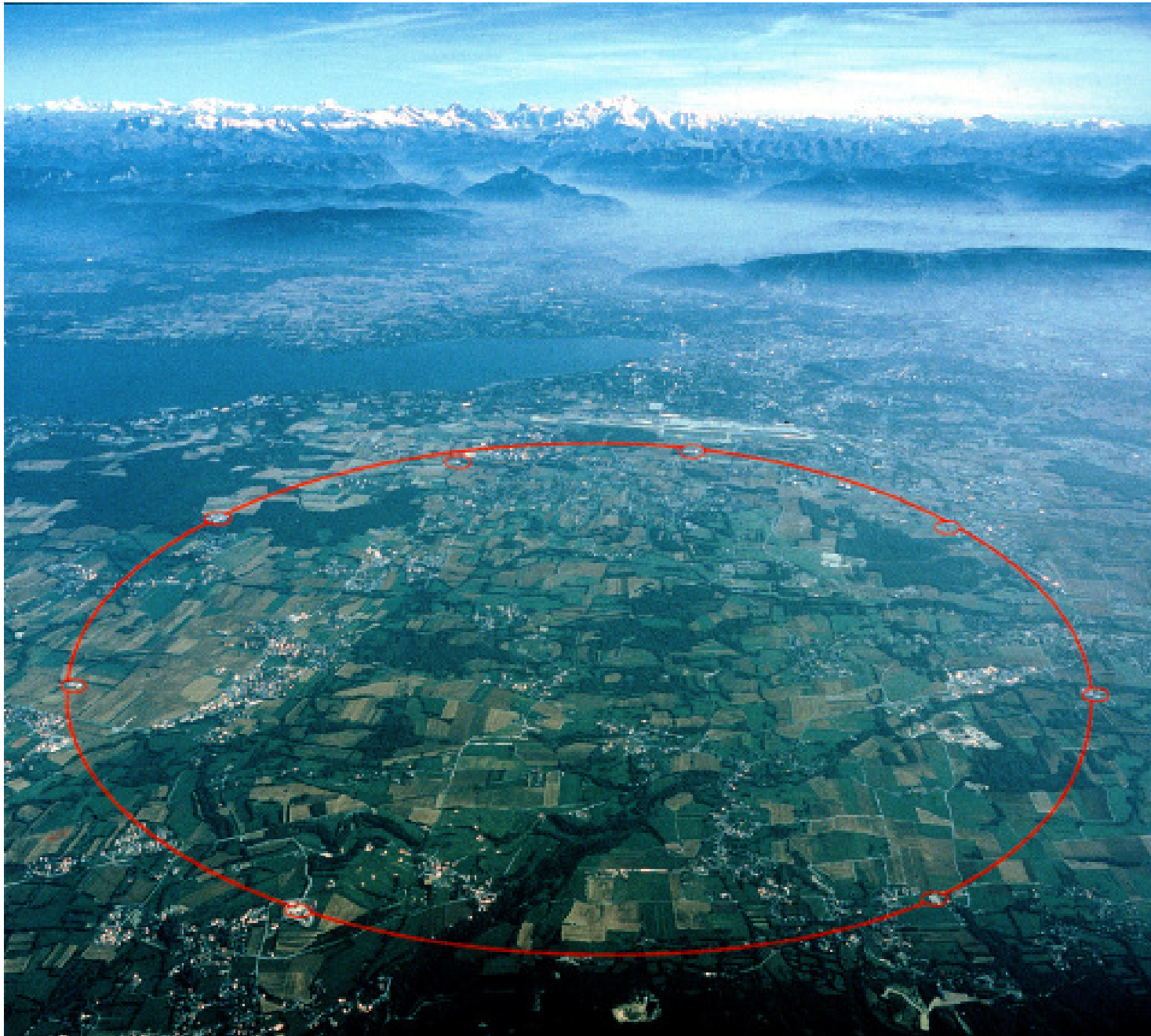
	leptons	quarks
1st generation	e, ν_e	d, u
2nd generation	μ, ν_μ	s, c
3rd generation	τ, ν_τ	b, t

3 generations of leptons and quarks. Quarks interact via the strong force; leptons don't. All have antiparticles – e.g. the electron's antiparticle is the positron e^+ .

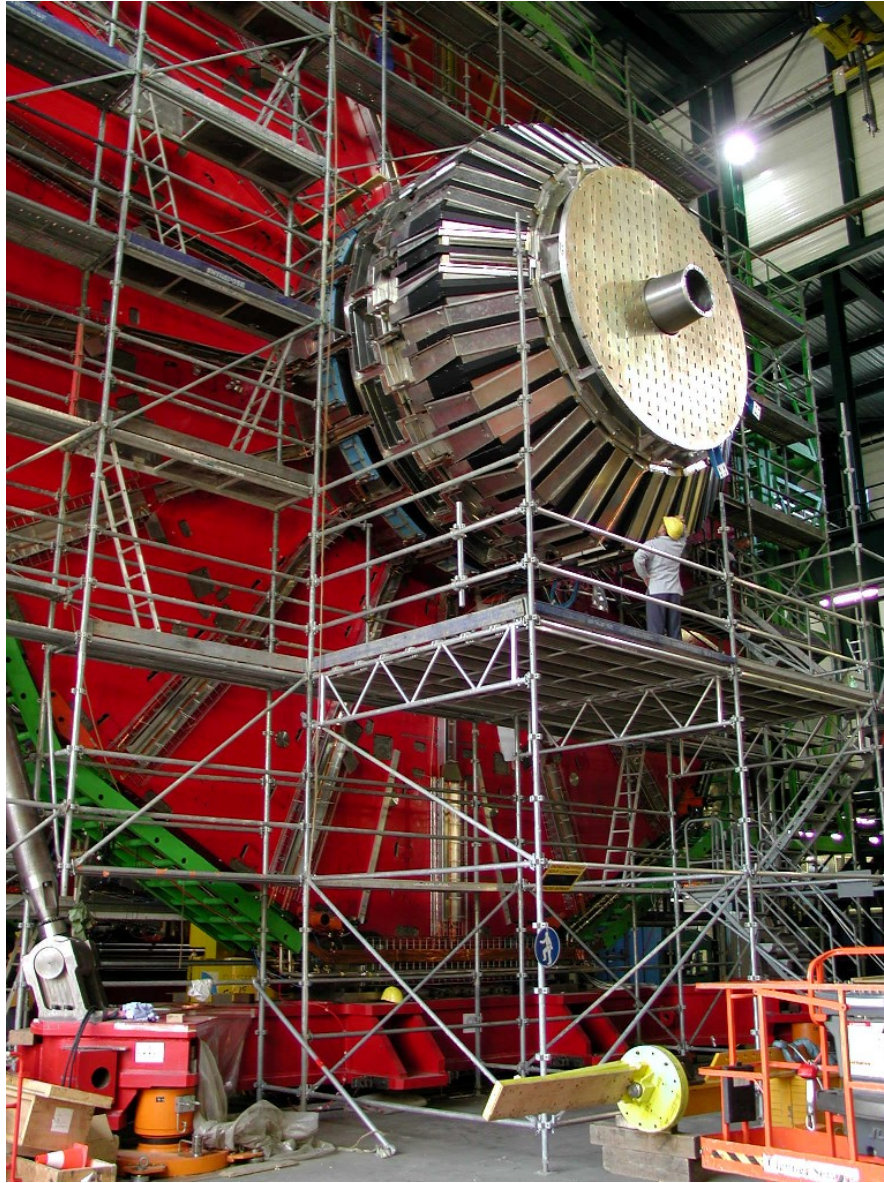
There is also one *not yet seen* particle called the Higgs, which interacts with other particles and gives them their mass!

We hope to see this – *or not!* – when the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) starts operating. Like the existing accelerator at the same site near Geneva, the LHC will be 27 kilometers in diameter...but it will collide protons instead of electron-positron pairs, and thus reach higher energies. Each proton will carry the kinetic energy of seven flying mosquitos (7 TeV).

The craftsmanship found in great cathedrals, but missing in most modern art, can now be seen here – underground.

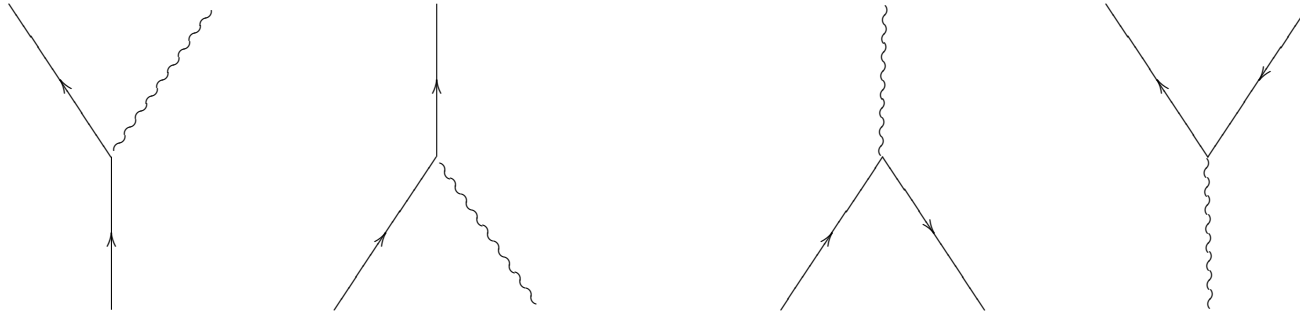


CERN image

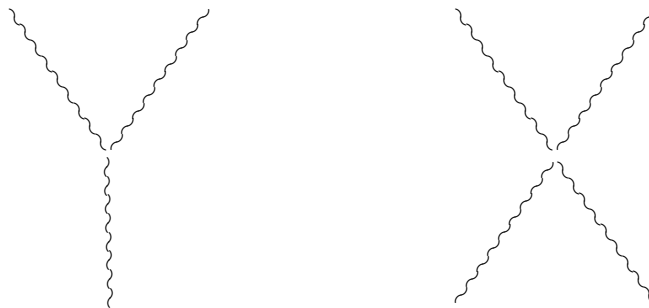


CMS electromagnetic calorimeter

Finally, there are lots of interactions. Most involve one ‘force’ and two ‘matter’ particles:



This is dictated by ‘gauge invariance’, a principle linking the Standard Model and general relativity. Gauge invariance also implies that most force particles interact with themselves:



The Higgs interacts with every particle that has mass.

It takes 18 numbers to describe the strengths of all these interactions. All but 3 involve the unseen Higgs.

By contrast, general relativity involves at most 1 dimensionless constant: the negative pressure of the vacuum, usually called the **cosmological constant**.

Mystery 2. Does the Higgs really exist? What is the origin of mass?

Mystery 3. Why do these 18 numbers have the values they do? Does this question even have an answer?

While it seems to have been designed by a committee, the Standard Model works quite well – *too well* for frustrated physicists who want to find something simpler.

String theory is very beautiful, but we must add complications by hand to make it fit reality. To get the ‘supersymmetric Standard Model’ from string theory requires lots of arbitrary choices – and the result still doesn’t match experiment until one ‘breaks supersymmetry’ by hand, introducing $\sim 10^5$ extra dimensionless constants. Is this an improvement?

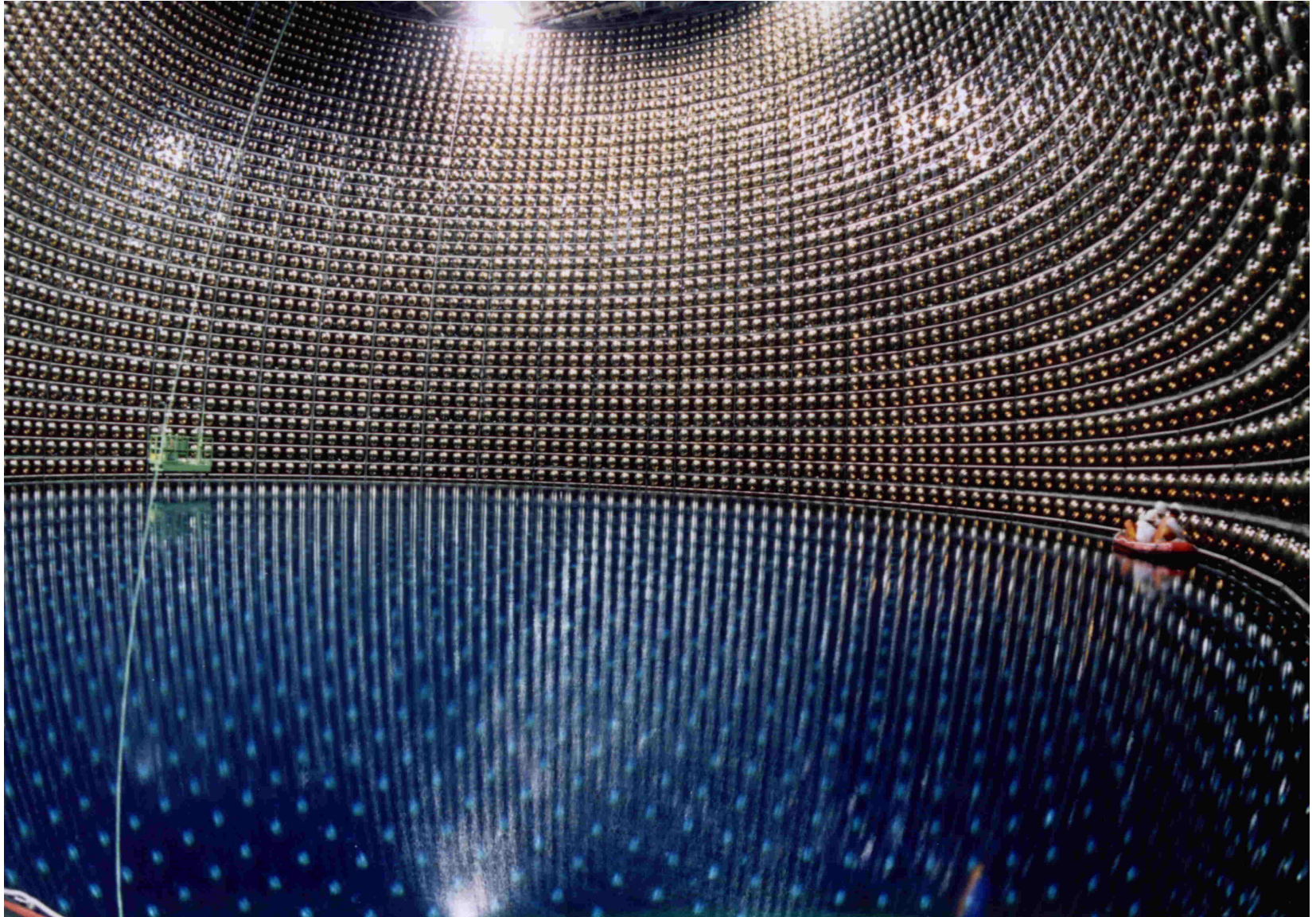
Perhaps at this moment beautiful theories are less useful than *new data*. To go beyond the Standard Model and general relativity, nothing is better than experiments that contradict these theories.

Where can we find defects in the Standard Model?

In the heavens!

For the last 20 years, our most shocking discoveries about the very small world of particles have come from astronomy. We now have amazing observatories: some on Earth, some in space, some buried deep underground.

For example, in Kamiokande there is a neutrino detector consisting of 50,000 tons of water buried beneath the Japanese Alps, carefully watched by 13,000 photodetectors. When neutrinos hit this water, a few interact with it, and emit tiny pulses of light:



Super-Kamiokande experiment

Since the 1960s, people have seen *fewer electron neutrinos coming from the Sun than expected!*

The Sun is powered by nuclear fusion. In fusion,

$$p \rightarrow n + e^+ + \nu_e$$

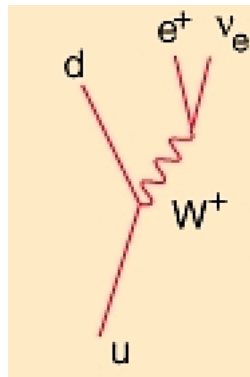
but really

$$p = u + u + d, \quad n = u + d + d$$

and the process at work is:

$$u \rightarrow d + e^+ + \nu_e$$

mediated by the weak interaction:



In the Standard Model neutrinos are massless and stable. So, we should see a certain number of ν_e 's coming from the Sun...but by 1997, the GALLEX and SAGE experiments had proved that we see only 1/3 of that number.

Since there are 3 kinds of neutrinos, maybe they 'oscillate' between different kinds! This can only happen if they have mass and suitable interactions exist.

In 1998, the detector in Kamiokande saw that ν_μ 's produced by cosmic rays hitting the atmosphere turn into something else...probably ν_τ 's. Many experiments are now studying neutrinos.

Mystery 4. Do neutrino oscillations fit into a slightly modified Standard Model – now requiring 25 dimensionless numbers – or must the theory be changed more drastically?

Astronomy also raises questions about general relativity: the accelerating expansion of the universe is one. We also see many black holes. Most galaxies have one at their center. The Milky Way has one about 3×10^6 times the mass of the Sun.

Ironically, it's easier to see the black hole in NGC1097, a galaxy 45 mega-lightyears away:



NASA image

To see such things clearly, astronomers built the European Southern Observatory (ESO) on a mountain in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile:



ESO image

Four 8-meter telescopes and three smaller ones combine to function as the biggest telescope in the world – the VLT, or Very Large Telescope:



ESO image

At night, the view is wonderful:



ESO image

The Very Large Telescope can see dust and gas spiralling into the center of galaxy NGC1097:



ESO image

In the galaxy's center, a black hole slowly swallows matter, emitting enough hot hydrogen to create hundreds of new stars in a ring 5500 light years across:



ESO image

All this *confirms* general relativity...but it makes a certain mystery very real:

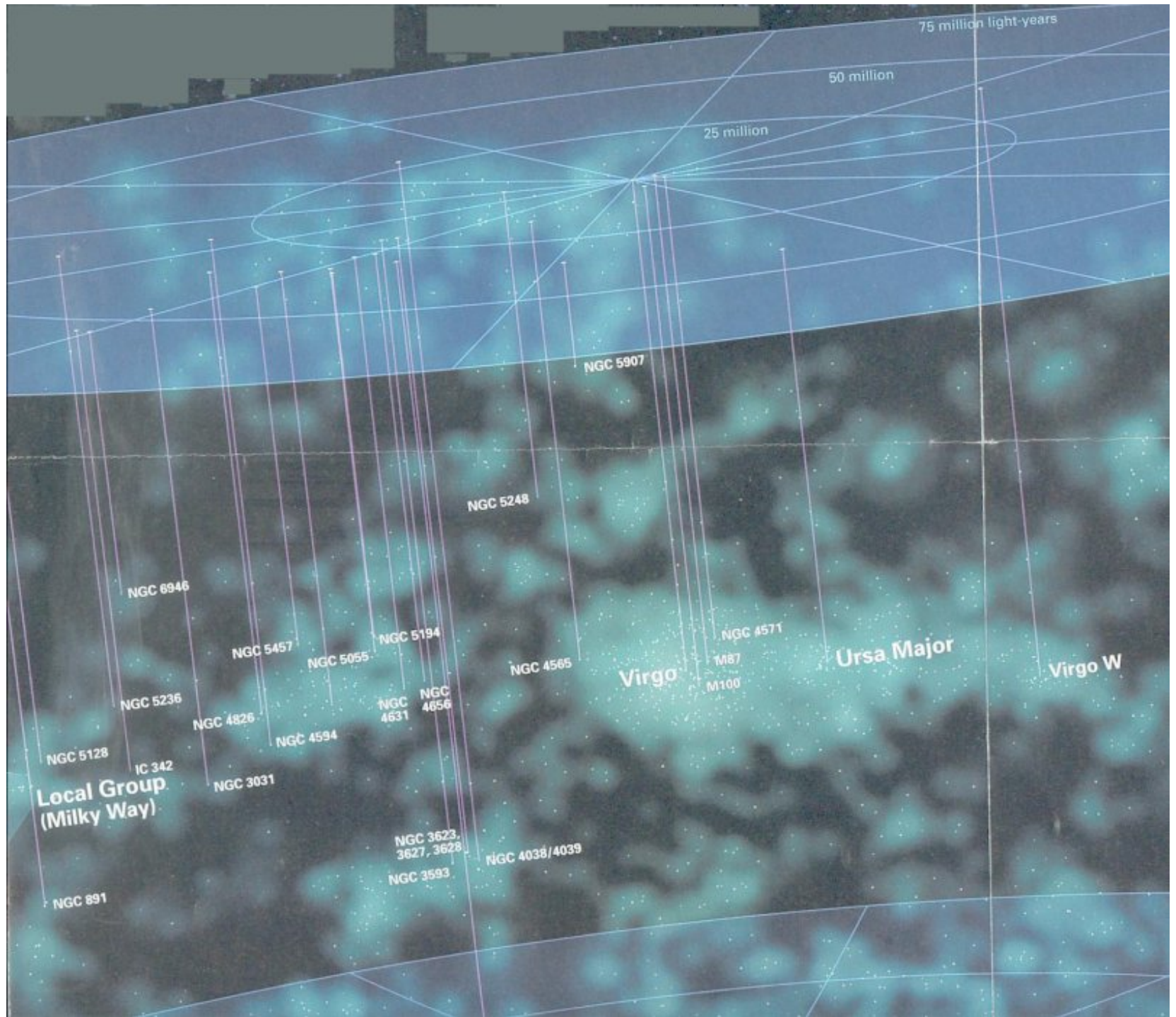
Mystery 5. What happens to things when they fall into a black hole?

Nobody knows – we may need a good theory combining quantum mechanics and gravity to answer this. Hawking has argued that black holes eventually radiate away their energy, with a solar-mass black hole taking 10^{66} years to do so. This does not fully solve the mystery.

But the real triumph of modern astronomy is that at last we can survey the *entire observable universe*...seeing back in time to just 400,000 years after the Big Bang, when the gas cooled enough to let light through.

From the cosmic viewpoint, our galaxy and NGC1097 are next-door neighbors, part of the Virgo Supercluster, a gravitationally bound collection of galaxy clusters 200 mega-lightyears in diameter.

The Virgo Supercluster contains about 200 galaxy clusters, with a total of about 2,500 large galaxies and 25,000 small ones:



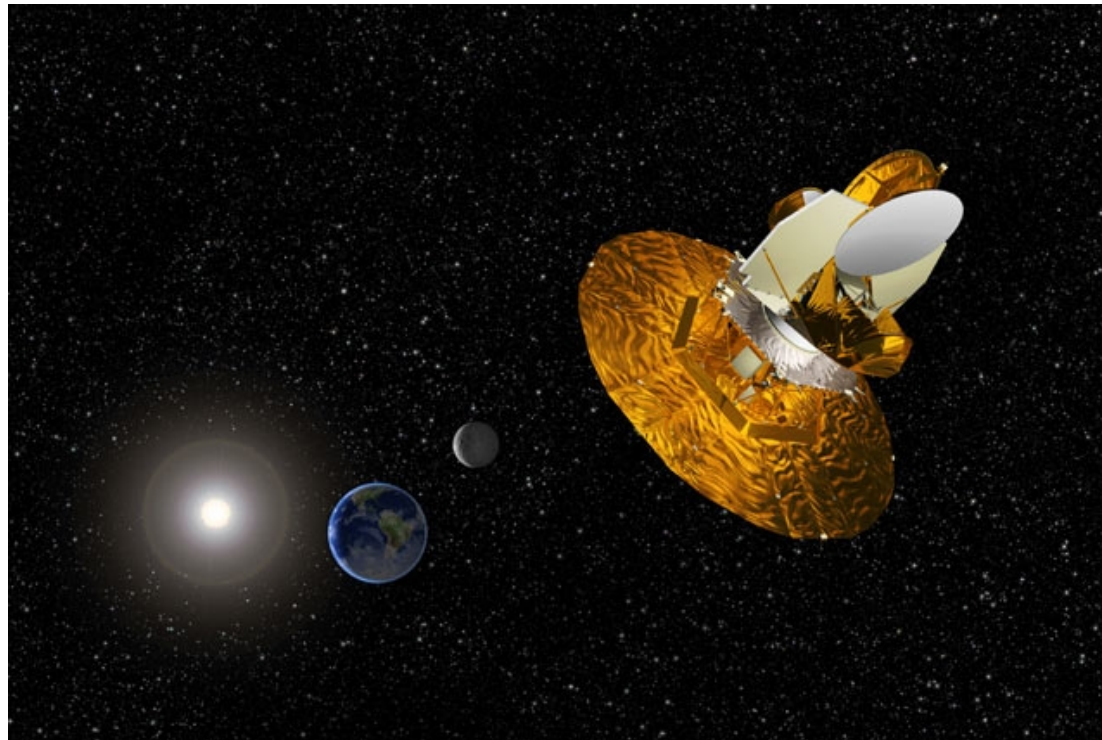
The Virgo Supercluster contains about 200 trillion (2×10^{14}) stars. But, its mass is about 10^{15} times that of the Sun. Since most stars are not huge, ***there are not enough stars to explain the mass of the Virgo Supercluster!***

This ‘missing mass problem’ is also evident in other ways:

- Galaxies rotate faster than can be explained by all understood forms of mass.
- Our theories of galaxy formation don’t work without positing ‘cold dark matter’.
- Fluctuations in the microwave background radiation fit a model with cold dark matter, not a model without.
- The Bullet Cluster gives direct evidence of cold dark matter.

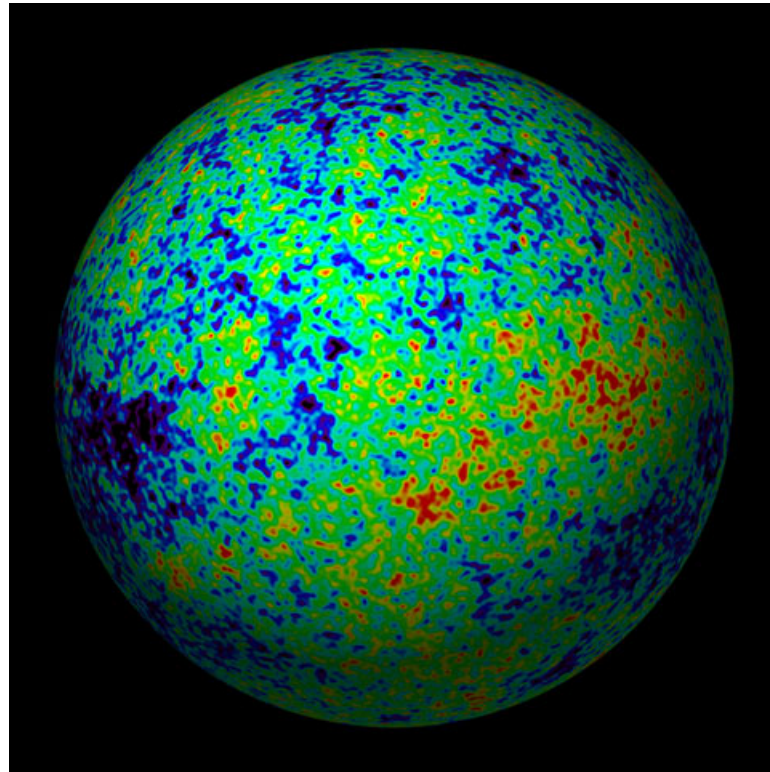
We need at least 5 times more cold dark matter than normal matter!

The Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) gives the best estimates so far. This is a satellite in orbit with the Earth always between it and the Sun. Facing out into the night, it can measure temperature variations of 10^{-6} kelvin in the chilly radiation left over from the early universe:



NASA image

400,000 years after the Big Bang, the hydrogen in the Universe cooled and thinned enough to let radiation travel freely! As the Universe expanded, this radiation cooled to 2.73 kelvin...but it kept an imprint of that early moment:



NASA image

In 2003, the WMAP team estimated that the energy of our universe, including $E = mc^2$, is made of:

- **4% normal matter**
- **23% cold dark matter**
- **73% vacuum energy**

where the vacuum's energy density is related to its pressure by $\rho = -P$.

(Since $3\ddot{R}/R = -\frac{1}{2}(\rho + 3P) = -P$ when $\rho = -P$, positive vacuum energy density makes the expansion of the universe accelerate!)

Mystery 6. What is cold dark matter – or what else explains what this hypothesis tries to explain?

There are more mysteries – type

open questions in physics

into Google for more!

But my main point is that since the 1980s, *theory* has contributed much less to fundamental physics than *observations*. Theorists continue to make predictions, but they are usually wrong or not yet testable. This has led to a feeling of malaise. Why are they failing?

Based on the triumph of the Standard Model and general relativity by the early 1980s, theorists made the mistake of guessing that *we were close to a final theory of fundamental physics*. They decided to first unify the forces other than gravity, then unify them with gravity. Many hoped that *mathematical aesthetics based on existing theories could quickly finish the job*.

When string theory arose as a candidate for the final theory, many theorists became excited. In 1980, Hawking said he thought there was a 50% chance that we would know the final theory in 20 years!

This soon proved to be overoptimistic. But when their theories made incorrect or untestable predictions, many theorists failed to rethink their position. It is difficult to publicly retract bold claims. Instead, they focused more and more attention on the *mathematical elegance* of their theories...some becoming mathematicians in disguise. (There are worse fates.)

Psychologically, the fate of string theory depends greatly on the results from LHC. Supersymmetry or not? Time will tell.

But meanwhile, experiments and observations continue, showing that *while we understand much, we live in a universe that is far from understood*, even at the simple level of fundamental physics.

This is not bad!

It just leaves more fun — for us, and for our children and grandchildren... if we leave them a world in which they can afford to study such questions.